

THE RAINFOREST ALLIANCE - ECO-O.K. CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

Introduction

The Rainforest Alliance is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of tropical forests. Founded in 1987, its mission is to develop and promote economically viable and socially desirable alternatives to the destruction of rainforests, an endangered, biologically diverse natural resource.

In 1991, the Rainforest Alliance created a labeling program called ECO-O.K., that specifically targets agricultural products grown at the expense of tropical ecosystems. The program has developed standards for bananas, coffee, and oranges, and is in the process of developing standards for cocoa and cane sugar. They aim to promote sustainable production of these products in the rainforests of Latin America. To date, ECO-O.K. has certified 5 farms for oranges, 3 farms for coffee, and close to 100 farms for bananas.

Program Summary

Anyone can suggest an agricultural product to the Rainforest Alliance as a possible category. Rainforest Alliance then evaluates the potential impact of the product and decides whether to develop criteria. Certification criteria are developed by a team of producers (farmers), scientists, conservationists, representatives of government agencies, and other stakeholders. Criteria are determined by scientific and community issues, and vary based on specific community needs.

Once criteria have been determined, certification begins with a field evaluation by ECO-O.K. technicians. The technicians document changes that must be made to meet criteria. After the grower has made the changes, the technical team returns to the farm to prepare a detailed report which is then passed on to a review board for approval or rejection. If approved, the product receives the ECO-O.K. seal of approval, distinguishing the labeled product from other retail products in the marketplace. Audits are conducted annually to ensure compliance.

Program Methodology

As mentioned above, anyone can suggest an agricultural product to the Rainforest Alliance as a possible category. Once Rainforest Alliance evaluates the potential impact of the product, it proceeds on whether to develop criteria. Criteria are determined by scientific and community issues, and vary based on specific community needs. The certification criteria for the ECO-O.K. project are unique compared to many of the other programs included in this report, in that they measure social as well as environmental responsibility. The specific guidelines for each of these criteria are extensive, involving many restrictions for each category. Although criteria have been developed for bananas, coffee and oranges, the criteria for oranges are not yet available in English.

Listed below are the basic principles to which any certified farm must comply. These standards are used regardless of crop or country of production.

Conservation:

- No deforestation of new farms
- Protect wildlife and native plants
 - no hunting
 - special protection for threatened or endangered species
 - Use native plants in buffer zones
- Conserve forest patches and take measures to improve them as wildlife habitat
- Protect streams and enact special protection for wetlands and riparian areas
- Mandatory canopy cover over coffee and cocoa
- No negative impacts on nearby parks and refuges
- Conserve watersheds

Community

- Fair and just treatment of workers
- Adherence to local labor laws and to ILO conventions
- The right to organize and join worker representative groups
- Fair and reasonable working hours within context of the local labor economy
- No racial discrimination
- Age restrictions on hazardous jobs
- Work should not interfere with education for children
- Safe and sanitary working conditions
- Dignified housing for workers living on the farm, including access to potable water
- Access to latrines, washrooms, and potable water
- Access to health care, including regular, mandatory, medical checkups for workers who apply agrochemicals
- Complete analysis of working areas to prevent accidents
- First aid and fire suppressants readily available
- Security measures, including proper safety equipment and secure storage of agrochemicals
- Clean and orderly working environment
- Good neighbor policy toward nearby communities
- Respect for cultures and beliefs
- Always a fair price and a green premium where possible

Cultivation:

- Soil conservation
- Vegetative cover

- Compost and recycle organic wastes
- Planting on contours; vegetative erosion barriers
- Minimal use of fertilizers, only when warranted by soil analysis
- Crops planted only on suitable areas according to national land-use and soil analysis maps
- Water conservation and reutilization
- Pollution control, including processing plants and mills
- Comprehensive waste management to reduce, reuse and recycle
- Minimal and strictly managed use of pesticides

Other Information

The Rainforest Alliance has not experienced any trade issues. It states that trade issues tend to be minimized because it is a voluntary, non-government, non-profit program.

As explained above, ECO-O.K. is a certification of sustainable operating practices. However, in the European Union, the use of the word “eco” is legislatively restricted to mean “organic.” The ECO-O.K. label is therefore not used, for instance, on Chiquita brand bananas in the EU even though its farms are certified.

References

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